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Former Inmates Give Back and Gain Bright Future

Volunteers lead impactful positive change – even in prison. Denise of Saint John knows this first hand. She benefitted from the services of the Elizabeth Fry Society while she was incarcerated in a provincial prison for involuntary manslaughter more than 10 years ago.

The support she received from volunteers there motivated her to turn her life around. She returned the favour through her own volunteer work with the same organization when she was released from jail. Now she spends an average of 60 hours each week helping women in the criminal justice system.

These days Denise liaises with duty counsel and lawyers. She encourages women with substance abuse problems to enrol in counselling or rehabilitation services. At the same time, Denise deals one-on-one with women serving time, both at the provincial jail in Saint John and the federal penitentiary in Truro, NS.

“I saw the help they gave to me while I was in jail and I decided I’m going to help if I can,” said Denise. “If I can help one woman not go back to jail, I’ve done my job.”

One of these women is Danielle.

Paying it forward

Danielle was sentenced to 26 months in Nova Institution for Women, a federal penitentiary in Truro.

“I had no one to bring my son to visit me,” said Danielle. “I couldn’t phone the foster home to have him hear my voice on the phone...the only way he heard me was through the Read Aloud program,” which is delivered through the Elizabeth Fry Society.

As part of this program, volunteers bring children’s books into prisons, and allow women to record themselves reading the books on cassette. The tapes are then brought to the children, who can have a relationship with their mother through the recorded readings.

“Volunteers like Denise make a real impact in the lives of the citizens of Saint John,” said Eileen McLaughlin, Executive Director of the Saint John Volunteer Centre. “They provide front-line services in our community. Volunteerism is alive and well in Saint John, and it’s important to take time to recognize the contributions of our many volunteers during National Volunteer Week.”

Volunteering has also allowed Denise to reintegrate into society.

“There are 12.5 million volunteers in Canada contributing more than two billion hours every year,” said Ruth MacKenzie, President & CEO of Volunteer Canada. “Denise and Danielle are shining examples of how volunteering can reinforce and establish values about giving back and minimize the chance that these women will be marginalized in society.”

Danielle’s post-prison life is looking up. She has regained custody of her son and she is now a fulltime employee of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saint John, working as an office administrator. She says the work of volunteers helped her get her life on track.

MacKenzie offers a suggestion to thank volunteers for their valuable contributions. “Telling volunteers how their contributions are making a positive impact is one of the best ways to thank them.”

About National Volunteer Week

National Volunteer Week (www.volunter.ca/nvw) pays tribute to the millions of Canadian volunteers who graciously donate their time and energy. This year’s 68th annual NVW takes place the week of April 10 to 16. It is Canada’s largest celebration of volunteers, volunteerism, and civic participation. The theme of this year’s National Volunteer Week is **Volunteers: Passion. Action. Impact.**

National Volunteer Week was first proclaimed in 1943 as an initiative to draw the public's attention to the vital contribution of women to the war effort on the home front. In the late 1960s, the focus was revived and broadened to include all community volunteers.

Investors Group has sponsored National Volunteer week for 12 years as part of its commitment to corporate citizenship. The company is a founding member of Volunteer Canada’s Corporate Council on Volunteering.